I can analyze the story of Tiananmen Square to identify acts of courage in the face of danger.

**Essential Vocabulary**

| **courage** | The ability to take constructive action in the face of fear or danger. To stand firm as a person of character and do what is right, especially when it is unpopular or puts one at risk. |
| **martial law** | The temporary substitution of military authority for civilian rule and is usually invoked in times of war, rebellion, or natural disaster. When martial law is in effect, the military commander of an area or country has unlimited authority to make and enforce laws. |

Tiananmen Square, Beijing China, June 1989. Licensed through the Associated Press.
Narrative

In April 1989, China — and the rest of the world - saw the beginning of a 6-week demonstration. Protestors demanded freedom of speech and press, and greater accountability in the Communist Chinese government. Their demonstration gained momentum as the government initially appeared to concede to some of the demands.

In late May, however, Communist party leaders declared martial law. As President Yang Shangkun insisted, “The Martial Law Command must make it quite clear to all units that they are to open fire only as a last resort. And let me repeat: No bloodshed within Tiananmen Square — period.” Yang was China’s president and a confidante of the powerful chair of the Central Military Commission, Deng Xiaoping. Deng appears to have taken a more hardline stance than Yang.

On June 3, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) entered Tiananmen Square and met the demonstrators with tanks and hundreds of thousands of troops. That night, Chinese soldiers fired into the crowd. International human rights groups estimate death tolls from the hundreds to the thousands. Protesters who survived were jailed. The Chinese government never released an official death toll.

On June 5, one day after the violent crackdown, a man temporarily stopped a line of tanks headed for the Square. When the leading tank tried to go around him, the man repeatedly stepped into its path. He then climbed onto the tank and seemed to speak to someone inside. After climbing down from the tank and again standing in its way, the man was pulled away by two people. Eyewitnesses disagree as to whether the two were government agents or concerned civilians. No one seems to know what happened to the man. Some say he is hiding somewhere in mainland China; others say he was shot by a firing squad weeks later. All film and images of the events had to be smuggled out of China, where censorship is the norm.

Almost a decade later, Time magazine included the “unknown rebel” as one of its “Most Important People of the Century.”

Analysis Questions

1. Is the Unknown Rebel a hero, or was he reckless to risk his life?
2. Are stands such as the one he took “worth it”? How do you know?
3. How would the Unknown Rebel’s act of nonviolent defiance have been characterized by the Chinese government? If individuals in the People’s Liberation Army (of China) were awarded medals for bravery by the government, would those have been deserved? Explain.
4. When most of us look back at this period in history and at this picture, who are we more likely to see ourselves as — the people driving the tanks, the individual standing in front of the tanks, or perhaps others watching from a safe distance? Explain.
5. Do you believe the Unknown Rebel, or any of the other demonstrators, experienced fear? Or might they have acted in spite of fear? Describe a time that you, or someone you know, acted courageously in spite of fear.

6. Should everyone try to “block” actions of others with which they do not agree? What kinds of injustices, if any, warrant this kind of protest?

7. How can you show courage in your own life? Identify examples:
   - at home?
   - at school and in extra-curricular activities?
   - in your community?